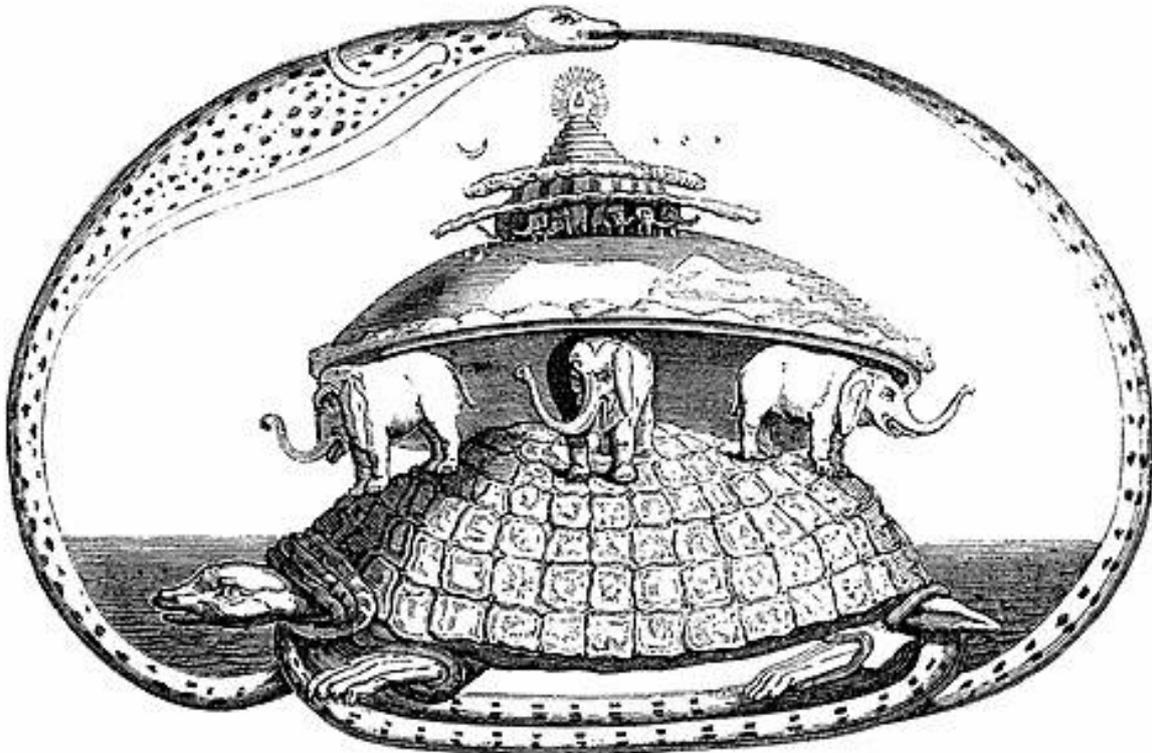


Ecography

Exploring Relational Methods



International Symposium 2021: 11-12, November

The International Symposium *Ecography* seeks to explore emerging methods that enable alternative modes of engagement with the myriad forms of life that humans share the planet with and ultimately depend on. The symposium is part of the Stockholm Anthropology Roundtable series. In thinking through ‘ecography’ⁱ, and in conversation with anthropology and environmental humanities more broadly, we hope 1) to break new ground by revealing new forms of connectivity, and 2) to advocate for more inclusive registers that capture already existing relations. The image above depicts The World Turtle, or Cosmic Turtle, in Hindu mythology, Chinese mythology and indigenous North American mythology. It illustrates the belief that a turtle or tortoise and other animals support the world. The image and its wider cosmology illustrate the early insights of various societies that life is always entangled and dependent on other beings, i.e. ways of knowing that we want to bring forward and explore in this symposium.ⁱⁱ

Environmental anthropology has increasingly addressed key ontological and methodological questions by incorporating several different critical approaches within the field. ‘Multispecies’ ethnography, ‘more-than-human’ and ‘other-than-human’ research focus on how to, with anthropological tools, reach across the species barrier and engage with the life and worlds of animals, plants, fungi or microbes. Anthropologists have taken ideas on the ‘species turn’ – “when species meet” (Haraway 2007) – and blended them with the classic anthropological studies of small-scale subsistence societies (cf. Boas 2016 [1888], Evans-Pritchard 1968 [1940], Rappaport 1968; MacCormack & Strathern 1980, cf. Lien & Pálsson 2021), the discipline’s focus on relations (Strathern 2020), non-Western cosmologies and ethnographic methods. Eduardo Kohn, for example, suggests that an ‘anthropology of life’ is on the horizon, taking inspiration from indigenous ontologies, asserting that all life, in essence, is composed of an ‘ecology of selves’ (Kohn 2013). In addition, Tim Ingold has long insisted, all living organisms exist *in*, and must be understood *in*, relation to the environment. Hence, to understand the making and unmaking of this world, Ingold suggests, requires an alternative mode of engagement, ‘from ontology to ontogeny. Ontology is about what it takes for a thing to exist, but ontogeny is about how it is generated, about its growth and formation’ (Ingold 2021:8).

This Symposium is a space to further push these debates by discussing which methods anthropologists can use to ethnographically and relationally study more-than-human worlds. These worlds are marked by distinctive connections and disconnections (Candea et al. 2015), localisations and delocalisations, human and non-human work (Besky & Blanchette 2019), cohabitation and exploitation, alienated within the imperial debris of capitalist industrialisation in ways that enable ongoing extractivism (Stoler 2008, Tsing 2015, Tsing et al 2017). We suggest that the heuristic term ‘ecography’ can help us discuss how to methodologically enhance ethnography (to write/describe a people) with its focus on human society, to better describe the relational environmental dynamics between diverse life forms. We use ‘eco’ to refer both to ecology as ‘a system of relations’ and to its older Greek meaning *oikos* ‘system of the home’ including its more-than-human organisms and materials. Half a century ago, Ernst Haeckel used the term to refer to ‘the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment’ or even the investigation of such totality (Haeckel cited in Stauffer 1957:141). Ecography, in that sense, gestures to the entangled webs of interconnected life co-constituting home, underlining the need to move beyond anthropocentric perspectives as life forms are dependent on each other. It also aims to consider the wider political and economic structures of industrial capitalism, the dominant human-induced driving force that is impacting planetary ecological relations and threatening long-term survival.

The Symposium is a space to discuss how we can methodologically engage with such a relational anthropology of different life-forms, where ecography can be used to decentre the human in our methodological toolkits, moving beyond species to look at various more-than-human worlds as homes to multiple life forms. We invite participants to methodologically explore hierarchical systems of relations and entangled webs of exploitation and cohabitation that include humans, other organisms and inorganic materials. By considering wider relational becomings and the politics of degradation and dispossession, we hope to move beyond ‘multispecies studies’, ‘more-than-human’ and ‘other-than-human’ approaches.

The Symposium also opens up for discussions about how we can incorporate methods from natural sciences, social sciences, and artistic research to develop a research methodology for categories previously seen as ‘voiceless’, such as rivers, mountains and biotopes, while critically reflecting on the implications of human representatives appointed to ‘speak on behalf’ of ‘natural’ entities. We also require new temporal tools, for not only are different life-worlds entangled, different temporalities are too (Metcalf and van Dooren 2012). We can no longer limit research to a sole subject or object; networks of relations are key (Latour 2005), and points of

relationality provide points of view, directions from which one can perceive the dynamics of connections and disconnections as life unfurls together with our interlocutors. Hence, by embracing new sensory methods and theoretical tools that trace the leaking trails of ecological relations, we may be able to comprehend other ways of being and relating to the world. By critically comprehending humanity relationally, as incorporating multispecies, technologies, infrastructures, more-than-human work and different forms of governance, we may be able to reduce the negative impact some ecosystems have endured as a direct result of capitalist industrial practices that have for far too long objectified the 'environment'.

We encourage participants to explore and consider the following possibilities:

Relational methods, theory and concepts:

- What methods can we use to trace life *relationally* and explore ongoing dynamic and often open-ended processes?
- How does incorporating different positions within our analysis of relational networks affect our observations and our research outcomes? What implications does taking the perspective of a species, an individual, an assemblage, a relation or a trace have for theoretical and empirical outcomes?
- What concepts, language and vocabulary can more lucidly capture relations, biographies, traces, effects, assemblages, leakages, connections and disconnections that create and recreate worlds?

Human interventions, practices and ethics:

- How can we come to recognise the complex ecologies of which humans are composed and continue to live by and with, and explore how this is changing due to the continual advance of capitalism and industrialism?
- How can the categories of work, exploitation and cohabitation be expanded to more-than-human worlds to gauge hierarchical relations, imperial legacies and long-lasting inequalities?
- What can we learn from indigenous knowledge systems and experiences that describe *oikos*, e.g. 'the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment'?

Senses, empathy and technology:

- How can we engage intimately and holistically with more-than-human interlocutors or ecological systems (waterbodies, forests etc.) through participant observation?
- What kind of embodied research and technology such as kinaesthetic empathy, non-verbal communication, bio-sensing, acoustic monitoring of a habitat or animal-borne go-pros, may help sharpen and attune our inevitably human senses to the phenomena we explore?
- How can we develop non-representational methods to write relationally about non-human agents?

The list above is only suggestions; participants are more than welcome to explore other themes or angles of ecography. We are especially interested work-in-progress or wider reflections on these issues.

On behalf of
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Notes

ⁱ Ecography, as a concept, was initially conceived by Andrew Mitchell and has since been developed together with the Environmental Research Group at the Department of Anthropology, Stockholm University. In addition, since 1978 the Nordic Society Oikos publish a journal named *Ecography*, with a focus on spatial and temporal ecology.

ⁱⁱ Image source: Alamy stock photo.

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